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Lennie, Sarah-Jane, Sutton, Anna and Crozier, Sarah ORCID logoORCID:  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7677-9231> (2021) Psychodrama and emotional  
labour in the police: A mutually beneficial methodology for researchers and  
participants. *Methods in Psychology*, 5. p. 100066. ISSN 2590-2601

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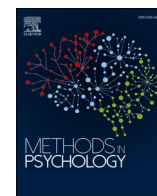
**Publisher:** Elsevier BV

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2021.100066>

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# Psychodrama and emotional labour in the police: A mutually beneficial methodology for researchers and participants

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## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Psychodrama  
Police  
Emotion

## ABSTRACT

This study utilises the qualitative methodology of psychodrama to create mutually beneficial research. Psychodrama is a group psychotherapy that uses action to explore participants' experiences and solutions to challenges. We demonstrate that the principles of this method can be used to identify the emotional feeling and display rules of emotional labour in policing. Researchers gained insight into officers' cognitive processing, identifying how feeling and display rules are communicated and enforced in the police, developing practical, operationally-sound solutions to officer mentalhealth. Participants reported experiencing therapeutic relief and new perspectives on their work as a result.

## 1. Introduction

Critical Action Research is a qualitative research method that seeks to engage the participant in collaborative problem resolution that is emancipatory and self-reflective. As qualitative researchers the desire is to understand the human condition in context and to do this, we use methods that engage participants. The value of rich qualitative information that can be obtained from these different approaches, and the power that this provides to the social science researcher, cannot be overstated (Weick, 2007). In this paper we make the argument for psychodrama as a qualitative research method and a meaningful vehicle for critical action research. We also highlight the use of psychodrama as a research method that promotes participant well-being. We demonstrate its use and benefits by reporting on a study investigating emotional labour in the police.

Emotional Labour is a theory relating to organisational culture and the requirements to suppress and express emotions as determined by the organisation (Hochschild, 2003). When emotional labour is applied to the police context, officers are found to be suppressing emotions experienced in response to traumatic events within their work. Consequently, officers are unable to process their emotional responses and often go on to develop poor mental health. As 1 in 5 officers are identified as having PTSD, it is of paramount importance that the underlying mechanisms that are driving this outcome are understood and addressed

(Brewin et al., 2020).

In the following sections we examine critical action research, highlighting the need for a research method that fulfils distinct criteria: to effectively identify issues and consequences of emotional labour in the police, develop operationally-sound and practical solutions, and support the well-being of serving police officers who took part in this research.

We then present psychodrama as a qualitative research method that fulfils these criteria and as a suitable tool by which to conduct critical action research. Psychodrama is a method that is especially useful for a study fraught with issues of trauma and well-being in the context of structural power imbalances and active silencing of emotional expression. Psychodrama helps to both empower research participants to safely express those previously prohibited emotions and co-create solutions to the challenges they experience.

Finally, we provide a brief overview of the emotional labour literature, with a particular focus on emotional labour in the police service to provide the context within which this research was conducted.

### 1.1. Critical action research

With its emphasis on research and change, action research is a form of collaboration and participatory research - engaging members of a community in identifying and resolving problematic issues under study (Myers, 2013). Critical action research is an extension of this, being

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2021.100066>

Received 20 October 2020; Received in revised form 9 July 2021; Accepted 10 July 2021

Available online 14 July 2021

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self-reflective and emancipatory, with a focus on change and social justice (Myers, 2013). It removes the traditional barriers created by the privileged hierarchical structure of 'professional researcher' and 'subjects', de-objectifying participants and establishing them as co-researchers, empowering them with the capacity to design and effect meaningful change (Davis et al, 2012). Taking this approach supported the desire of this study to seek social change through collaboration, establishing a relational narrative between researcher and co-researchers, ensuring that participants are seen as more than resources employed by an organisation and are given a platform for which to exercise their voice (Githens, 2015).

In taking a critical approach, we sought not only to discover how things are put together and produce the knowledge that reflects society and the organisation, but also to reveal the distortions of power to which individuals are subjected and subject themselves (Miller, 2000). In doing so, we critically evaluate and deconstruct: challenging the status quo and our complicity within; daring to transform prejudicial, alienating and oppressive social and cultural practices that seek to freeze social reality to the benefit of one and expense of another (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Myers and Klien, 2011).

To achieve this challenging ambition of uncovering the otherwise hidden and stifling practices we sought a method that would effectively engage participants in more than passive discussion. Our aim was to achieve greater depths of self-reflection through collective action; exploring behaviour, personal internal realities and shared experience. We looked to a method that provided a safe space for participants to identify issues that would otherwise go unspoken and unchallenged in everyday organisational life as a consequence of fear and stigma. Psychodrama provided the safety and structure to support participants in exploring these issues that were otherwise taboo between colleagues.

## 1.2. What is psychodrama?

Psychodrama is a group psychotherapy that uses guided action and role play to examine participants' problems and experiences (Jones, 2017). The aim is to develop participants' clarity and insight, allowing them to test their perceptions of reality and to develop their own solutions. Ultimately, psychodrama as a therapy aims to help participants to learn and change their behaviour (Kaya and Deniz, 2020). With the same self-reflective and emancipatory focus as critical action research, by allowing participants to work with problematic situations without the consequences they would face in their normal lives, psychodrama supports creativity in problem-solving and can create emotional release and insight (Jones, 2017).

The founder of psychodrama, psychiatrist Jacob Moreno, held that well-being/mental health and spontaneity were closely related. Showing distinct parallels with the more recent broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), in which positive emotions help to broaden a person's through-action repertoires and thereby build their resources, Moreno (Moreno, 1946) suggested that a mentally healthy person is able to be more spontaneous and creative, exploring alternative possibilities and choosing better actions. The principles of psychodrama provide a structured, supported way to engage in this creativity and thereby enable participants to create their own solutions to problems and improve their mental health. These principles echo the research intentions of critical action research in supporting collaboration and participation in exploring challenges where solutions are sought through group creativity and spontaneity and are used to explore past, present and future events (British Psychodrama Association, 2019; Wilkins, 1999).

A psychodrama session consists of three stages. In the *warm-up* stage, the director of the sessions gives the group short activities that anticipate the skills used in role play, for example, movement or improvisation. In the *action* stage, participants act out situations from their lives. This is usually a situation brought to the group by one of the participants, representing a particular issue or problem they wish to work through.

Several techniques can be used in this stage to enrich the process and enable participants to explore different perspectives, such as role reversal or commentary from the director or other participants. Finally, in the *sharing* stage, participants reflect on their behaviour and develop deeper understanding of the situations and articulate potential solutions (Moreno, 1946).

### 1.1.1. Psychodrama as therapy and research method

Psychodrama is effective at improving well-being and a recent systematic review (Orkibi and Feniger-Schaal, 2019) showed that psychodrama interventions can qualitatively improve self-worth, self-awareness and self-expression and reported coping with difficulties (Kaya and Deniz, 2020). In quantitative studies, psychodrama interventions resulted in improvement in well-being/quality of life measures, a reduction in anxiety and depression, and improvements in behavioural measures such as a decrease in aggression and improved social functioning.

However, it is the role of psychodrama in supporting cognitive insight, interpersonal feedback and behavioural learning, (utilising processes such as *action-insight* - the process of looking inwards for inner truth and contrasting to the outer world) that makes the application of psychodrama as a research method unique in its ability to capture the interaction between the inner personal and outer social worlds and the consequences (Kellerman, 1992).

Psychodrama embodies the concept of social psychology in the sense that social behaviour is understood from the inner experience as well as the observable outer behaviour and takes an emancipatory stance in supporting the exploration of the authentic self and liberation from others' and their own false perceptions (Kellermann, 1992). Moreno held that psychodrama was an effective way of engaging with participants' internal worlds and interpersonal relationships (Jones, 2017) and that it could be a valuable method of supporting emancipatory phenomenological research (Kellerman, 1992), yet its use as a research method rather than simply a therapy, is extremely limited. We propose that psychodrama presents a unique and valuable research method in psychology that is both rigorous and exploratory, and respectful. It is rigorous and exploratory in that it provides a standardised yet flexible approach to qualitative data collection. The standardised method involves a simple three phase process of warm-up, role-plays and reflection. Participants are encouraged to switch roles in order to experience different view points and provide the opportunity for deeper reflection. In this study, further standardisation was achieved by using the same role play across different workshops. Within this standardised approach, however, there is considerable scope for flexibility as the researcher can apply the method to a range of social and organisational settings and develop role plays specific to the area, and has the scope to probe specific areas during the reflections according to the focus of the study. In addition, participants can choose for themselves how to respond within the role play and which elements they wish to focus on within the reflections.

Of importance, psychodrama is also respectful of participants' contributions, providing direct benefits such as improved well-being and behavioural repertoires as a result of taking part in the research, providing access to the rich interplay between participants inner-worlds and engagement with the social outer-world, and how this manifests for participants in terms of well-being and mental health. In this paper, we will demonstrate this rigour and respect by reporting on a study of emotional labour in the police.

## 1.2. Emotional labour

Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labour as the commercialisation of everyday emotion work. This emotion work involves the ability to sense and govern one's own emotional state and manipulate it in order to obtain a desired emotional response in others (Guy et al., 2012). Organisations control employees' emotional suppression or expression

through 'feeling and display rules' and emotional exchanges with customers and clients become a commodified interaction: designed by the organisation and packaged and delivered by the employee (Hochschild 1983; Grandey and Sayre, 2019). Feeling and display rules are usually implied rather than overt and organisations will use different monitoring and enforcement strategies, such as bonuses and promotion, 'mystery shoppers' or reinforcement through organisational culture where unacceptable expressions of emotions are challenged by colleagues (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey and Sayre, 2019). Target audiences can also be drawn in to assist with the monitoring of employee behaviour by organisations openly communicating expected company standards and advertising complaint procedures (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987).

### 1.2.1. Consequences of emotional labour

Much of the research around emotional labour focusses on human service occupations, where empathy is an important element of work (Wharton, 1999). Ironically, however, the demands of emotional labour can mean that workers can become 'robotic, detached, and un-empathetic' (Wharton, 1999:162). Within her original study Hochschild identified the difference between display and true feeling as 'emotive dissonance' (1983) and the effort involved in maintaining this dissonance in the long term leads to strain and eventually burnout (Stenross and Kleinman, 1989; Pogrebin and Poole, 1991; Brotheridge and Lee, 2003).

Organisations often undervalue the toll of emotional labour on individuals, leading some researchers to assert that the positive outcomes (customer relations) are outweighed by the costs of emotional effort and the depletion of emotional resources that individual employees experience (Grandey et al., 2015). Emotional labour has been linked to poor work attitudes and increased job strain, stress-related physical outcomes including hypertension and heart disease, and broader psychological symptoms such as burnout, emotional exhaustion and memory loss (Jeung et al., 2018). Grandey et al. (2015) suggest that emotional labour should be recognised by the organisation through employee support rather than managerial control and in doing so acknowledge the value of the employee's authentic emotions and emotion work. Through this, employees would develop a sense of personal worth and value to their authentic emotions and in doing so this would reduce dissonance and dissociation as well as burnout.

Authentic emotional expression would also allow cognitive processing as a way towards self-acceptance and understanding. For example, expressing emotions related to a traumatic event whilst in safe and supportive setting provides therapeutic relief, including fewer intrusive thoughts and PTSD symptomology, improved immune system function, and physical and mental well-being, in comparison to those who do not express their authentic emotions (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). However, organisational cultures around emotional expression can impede voluntary disclosure due to a sense of shame attached to emotional display. Individuals who operate in this kind of culture of stigma and shame are less likely to benefit from emotional expression or engage in therapeutic opportunities with any conviction (Kennedy-Moore and Watson, 2001).

### 1.2.2. Emotional labour in the police

There is extensive evidence that officers engage in emotional labour, suppressing their authentic emotions in line with organisational and social expectations (Rees and Smith, 2008; MacEachern et al., 2018; Lennie et al., 2019). It is suggested that emotional labour may also exacerbate the emotionally demanding qualities of police work specifically, increasing the likely hood of poor psychological outcomes such as burnout and likely contributing to increased PTSD symptomology (Van Gelderen et al., 2014).

Police officers are at the highest risk of both performing emotional labour and suffering the subsequent consequences of burnout, compared to employees in health care, teaching, hospitality, finance, tourism, the clergy and flight attendants (Chapman, 2009). There is also evidence

that the feeling and display rules extend within an officer's life: beyond interactions with offenders and victims, and into relationships with peers and supervisors (Adams and Buck, 2010; Lennie et al., 2019). Of particular concern, authentic emotions are considered as weakness, for example; humour is often employed as an emotional release when dealing with trauma (Pogrebin and Poole, 1991). This complexity is difficult to capture, particularly through retrospective self-report methods that seek to capture the very concept that restricts emotional articulation.

In fact, research into emotional labour in policing has generally taken a positivist approach, reducing emotional experiences to dependent and independent variables (e.g. Adams and Buck, 2010; Bhowmick and Mulla, 2016). Hochschild (1983), in contrast, is clearly concerned with how power within the organisation is used to control the individual and their emotional experience through the role of social structures.

### 1.3. Psychodrama as a research method for emotional labour in the police

We argue that it is inadvisable to attempt to reduce emotional labour and human emotions to discrete occurrences without context (Laverty, 2003) and to reduce emotions to variables and surface acting to causation. Instead, we investigate the policing experience of emotional labour within a social and organisational context, allowing participants to openly express their own cognitive processing and underlying motivations for emotional expression and suppression. By identifying these multiple perceptions of reality we can strengthen and support previously silenced voices (Foucault, 1986; Laverty, 2003), providing a platform for officers to speak out without the fear of recrimination or judgement. This in turn presents the opportunity for the researcher and participants to challenge the continuing emotional oppression that exists with the organisation and society at large, and explore practical solutions to address the existing culture of stigma and oppression (May, 2002).

In this study, we report on the use of the principles of psychodrama as a research method that can act as both a psychotherapeutic tool and a form of data collection. Psychodrama brings the advantage of being used as therapeutic means to enable coping and processing of the stressful and distressing experiences (Moreno, 1987; British Psychodrama Association, 2019) that police officers face in their roles. In addition, psychodrama has the potential to ease participants' suffering brought on by the emotional suppression carried out as an aspect of emotional labour, in line with the ethical precept of reducing potential harm. With its recognition that every role has two sides (Moreno, 1946 cited in Azoulay and Orkibi, 2015), psychodrama is particularly well suited to research on emotional labour which explores the inner and authentic emotions of police officers in contrast to their outward emotional display. Other methods may not so thoroughly capture this psychological and sociological interaction due to the complexity of cognitive processing and social requirements that participants might otherwise be unaware of. Finally, role play is a method that sits naturally in the context of policing, which is a profession taught through role play within training, preparation for large scale events, and used within recruitment selection and promotion centres (Sharp, 2000; Van Hasselt et al., 2006). Using role play underpinned by psychodrama principles encourages participants to explore their immediate experiences of emotional labour within a psychological safe space of a fictional police environment. This allows for the capture of rich data as participants jointly express and explore their inner emotional responses whilst reflecting on their understanding of what emotional display is expected of them in given situations. It also allows participants to support each other in their understanding whilst seeking ways in which to resolve the issue at hand (Kellerman, 1992). This approach fulfils the emancipatory aspect of critical action research as participants are involved in identifying potential solutions to the psychological impact of emotional labour in policing. By using psychodrama as a qualitative research method, researchers and participants collaborate to seek alternate approaches to articulating authentic emotions within the operational and social environment of the police force

and to identify the changes required to overcome the barriers to authentic emotional expression.

## 2. Method

The study reported here was one element in a larger research project which aimed to explore the experience of emotional labour in the police force using a sequential qualitative mixed method design (Lennie, 2019). In this phase, the research moved from a problem identification process to problem resolution and engaged participants through role play, underpinned by the principles of psychodrama. We took a participant collaborative approach to designing an operationalised response to positive emotional expression within the police service.

### 2.1. Procedure

Two single day workshops were held on university premises. In the first half of the workshop, groups of serving police officers were presented with and discussed interim findings from previous research. They were then familiarised with the theoretical concepts of emotional labour, critical action research and reflective practice, with the intention of empowering the participants and giving them a good understanding as to their role within the research, in line with an action research ethos (Davis et al., 2012).

The second half of the workshop was the psychodrama element. It involved a 'warm-up', a role play consisting of several 'scenes' written by the first author (Supplementary Material 1) and group discussions (sharing). The role plays and subsequent sharing were underpinned by the principles of psychodrama, to aid the exploration of inner and outer emotional expression and experience (Kellermann, 1992).

The role play process differed from that of standard psychodrama in that it did not ask a protagonist to act out an aspect of their life. It was felt that this would be too intrusive for the level of this research and had the potential to become too distressing for participants and such is the stigmatising nature of emotional labour in the police, using personal experience could have a prohibitive effect on emotional disclosure from participants. Instead, the researcher provided a pre-written scenario that provided five-character backgrounds and a detail of events which allowed the participants to act the given scenarios 'in-character'. Participants who were not acting roles were given observer sheets and allocated a character to observe. Roles were also reversed, following the principle of psychodrama, allowing participants to experience the others' perspective and the impact each character had on the other (Kellerman, 1992). This was particularly important in the exploration of the emotional labour phenomenon as it allowed participants to understand how individuals, and different roles contribute to the silencing effect of emotional labour within police culture.

After each scene had been acted out the researcher encouraged conversation about how the different characters were feeling, and why they had behaved in the way that they did (known as *sharing* in psychodrama). The discussions here explored participants' experience of the culture around emotional expression within the police and how this had affected them. This sharing discussion led naturally into round table discussion of possible operational and organisational solutions to the issues identified throughout the day, where participants collaborated in developing recommendations.

Throughout the day the researcher (first author) engaged in participant observation as an appropriate way to capture the observable element of the phenomenon under study and how participants interact based on a shared (or otherwise) understanding (Jorgensen, 1989). This method captured how participants behaved towards each other and with each other in a neutral environment, and also captured interaction with the researcher. The role plays and discussions were audio and visually recorded.

In summary, data were collected through participant observation, audio and visual recording of role plays and discussions, and participant

observer sheets completed by participants.

### 2.2. Participants

Participants included serving officers in their second year of a bachelor's degree in policing, who volunteered to take part in the workshop as an enrichment activity for their undergraduate course, and officers from the first author's police network who volunteered in response to a call for participants via social media. All of the participants were of the rank of inspector and under and came from a variety of police forces across England and Wales but further demographic details were not collected in order to protect participants, as some were working in covert roles.

### 2.3. Ethical considerations and data management

Modern ethical governance holds the relationship between researcher and participants, and the treatment of participants throughout a study, at the heart of research (Webster et al., 2014). The design of this study was intentional in its prioritisation of participant welfare, anticipating that the nature of the study would require participants to disclose potentially emotionally demanding or distressing experiences. Procedures were put in place in line with the authors' institutional Advisory Distress Protocol and with reference to the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (Economic and Social Research Council, 2015). The participant information sheet gave a detailed explanation of exactly what the research process entailed and how participants would be asked to reflect on their experiences. It contained the researcher's contact details and those of support services that are available to both police officers and the general public. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the role play began and their right to withdraw was explained along with the use of verbatim (though unattributed) quotes in future publications.

Every care was taken to provide complete confidentiality for participants. This is particularly important for research that asks participants to discuss the very topic that is prohibited for their chosen profession. Participants were also asked for permission to be recorded. Some who worked in covert operations declined to be recorded and the researcher ensured that those individuals were out of shot of the camera and not at any time audibly recorded. No identifying demographic information was collected, all recordings were password protected and only accessible by the researchers and all quotes from participants reported here use non-gendered pronouns.

### 2.4. Materials

The vignette used in the role play tells the story of 'Jo', a police officer who attended the scene of a murder and was assaulted trying to detain the murderer. It was designed from a number of incidents taken from previous research (Lennie, 2019) and the researcher's own experience in the police. The role play was used to support an in-depth exploration of officers' engagement with feeling rules and their perceptions of internal emotional experience contrasted against external emotional display, in accordance with organisational and cultural requirements. Participants were provided with a detailed context to set the scene, as well as role descriptions for the characters: police officer Jo, three other members of Jo's Group (Sergeant Sam, PC Jordan who drives the patrol car and PC Kerry who drives the van) and an unnamed night officer back at the station. The context, scripts and instructions for the different characters and scenes from the role play can be found in Supplementary Material 1: Role Play Scenario and Scripts.

In the scenario, Jo attends the scene of a murder alone. Entering a domestic premises, Jo is attacked by the murderer and loses their baton as the murderer flees. Jo attempts to save the life of the victim and is then deployed to accompany the victim to the hospital, where the victim dies. The role play itself begins back in the station and participants are



allocated roles to play out and demonstrate how they would behave. As a subsequent part of the role play, the team sergeant debriefs the protagonist in the report writing room in front of the other officers. The sergeant later holds a 1-2-1 with Jo before going home.

## 2.5. Data analysis

It is argued that there is no one objective truth but that there are multiple truths borne out from subjective experience and that these truths are often shifting, as experience is lived (Silverman, 2006; Marshall, 2008). In the subsequent analysis the nature of the findings emerge from the voices of the participants in the form of a vignette, echoing Marshall (2008:684) aspiration to avoid a conventional academic 'suppression of voice, depersonalization, acquiescence to norms', as this would only continue the very emotional labour and silencing of police officers that this study seeks to expose.

In achieving this, the voices of participants and researcher were integrated and are presented as a reflexive account of the joint production of meaning (Langer, 2016). This is a development of the use of vignettes as a data gathering instrument, and instead follows the form and intent of Langer (2016) in his use of the research vignette as a qualitative method of writing to illustrate a psychosocial dynamic study of HIV infections among gay men. Through this Langer not only raises the voice of his participant(s) but addresses and brings clearly into view the notion that 'the researcher is inescapably (and frighteningly) ensnared in the phenomenon under study' (Langer, 2016:738).

## 2.6. Data integration

The data obtained from the workshops were analysed in two ways. First, thematic analysis of the participants' engagement with the psychodrama was used to identify the problems of emotional labour in policing and demonstrate how participants themselves co-created potential solutions and recommendations. Second, the elements of psychodrama from a therapeutic standpoint were articulated and explored, using participant quotes to illustrate its therapeutic effects.

Initially the data from the two workshops were considered separately. First the audio and visual recordings of the role plays were analysed for themes related to the emotional labour theory, this was cross referenced against the participant observer sheets addressing the same role plays, and themes were either enriched or new themes emerged. Then the discussions (known as the sharing in psychodrama) were analysed. Although these too included references to the emotional labour theory, they were intentionally directed towards participant-led problem solving, drawing on the principles of critical action research. Within this, the therapeutic aspects of the psychodrama method were discussed (initiated by the participants) – this was also documented via researcher observation and personal reflections. Once this was completed with each workshop, the findings were integrated for the final comparative analysis.

## 3. The value of psychodrama as a qualitative research method

In this section, we demonstrate the value of psychodrama as a qualitative research method by first illustrating how effectively the participants engaged with the method, then reporting on the depth and quality of the data we were able to collect, and finally, discussing the benefits for the participants themselves.

### 3.1. Participant engagement with the research

As noted above, the first element of the workshop involved theoretical input and the sharing of the findings of the previous states of the study. A concern with investigating emotional labour is that the very emotional silencing under study might be replicated within the research setting. However, this concern was soon allayed as participants

responded to this first part of the workshop openly, sharing personal experiences of emotional suppression and articulating their identification of emotional labour in the workplace. For example, one participant became tearful as they recounted their experience of fear of injury or even death at work and subsequently not returning home to their family, which they felt they could not share within the organisational environment. This was an atypical display of emotion by a police officer in the company of other officers and provided an insight into how willing participants would be to share their experiences and engage with the research.

This engagement and opening up was evident within the warmup exercise too. This element of the psychodrama method asked participants to disclose three unusual things about themselves and usually resulted in admissions of minor celebrity appearances or foreign language skills. But one participant spoke about how a year ago they had planned their own suicide. This was very well received by the group who offered their support, shared experience, and asked questions compassionately. This emotional purging and supportive response from the group is exactly what is anticipated from the Sharing aspect of psychodrama (Karp, 2010).

Emotional engagement was obvious in those participants observing the role plays too. The emotions they described most were anger and frustration, and concern for the protagonist 'Jo'. In considering their own feelings had they been in 'Jo's position, they noted consistently embarrassment, fear and feeling overwhelmed and distressed at the events that they experienced and witnessed. Overall, they described feeling very let down by the organisation and their sergeant, but also that they had let their team and themselves down. The outcome of this was that they felt isolated, undervalued and judged. One participant articulated the feelings of 'Jo' in the scenario:

'you don't care about me ... not once did you ask how I am'

In their reflections, participants all noted that the role play was realistic: something similar had either happened to themselves or they were aware of a similar scenario. They agreed that this could be an everyday event, for example, one participant wrote on their observer sheet:

'Much of what is detailed in this scenario resonates with feelings I have had and struggled with.'

This identification is an anticipated outcome of the psychodrama method where participants are encouraged to see how they identify with the protagonist – normalising their experience through the recognition of the commonality of their experience within the group. This has a therapeutic outcome in helping participants to feel less isolated in their experience, and more comfortable in expressing their own internal emotions (Karp, 2010).

In taking part in the role plays themselves, the participants very quickly began exploring alternate perspectives to their own. For example, when two officers in workshop 1 were allocated the roles of Sgt and Jordan, they commented how this was a reversal of their real-life situations:

'We were just discussing between ourselves that it is a role reversal between us two. \*\*\*\*'s character has got four years' service, which is similar to mine, and the Sgt has fourteen years' service, with a little bit less than yours. And it is interesting now that I am now stepping into this person's shoes and you are stepping down..'

'It is interesting for myself to put myself into this 4 year PC who's a bit despondent at the moment so, yeah, it is difficult to try and interpret how this person is thinking and feeling, without my own experience.'

This exploration by the participants shows how they are already engaging with the role-reversal principal of psychodrama and how this encourages them to see the experience from others' eyes (Moreno, 1987; Karp, 2010).

Through the psychodrama, the participants themselves identified issues and sought solutions, demonstrating the critical action research intention playing out within the workshops. Participants were empowered to act not only as subjects of the study, but to drive the research,

problem identification and solution (Myers, 2013).

### 3.2. Research themes

Two main themes developed out of these psychodrama workshops, addressing participants' *Experience of Emotional Labour*, as well as their development of practical solutions to support *Officer Well-being*. We now describe these themes briefly, with the emphasis upon noting how the use of psychodrama provided us with extra data and insight beyond what could be achieved with more traditional methods. In order to illustrate the benefits of psychodrama as a research method, we describe these themes by integrating details of participants' role plays and their subsequent reflections, the observer reactions and the researchers' notes.

#### 3.2.1. Experience of and reflection on emotional labour

This theme included sub-themes about what the feeling and display rules are, how those rules are communicated by supervisor behaviour or organisational policy, and finally, how officers' emotional expressions are silenced or supported.

**3.2.1.1. Feeling and display rules.** The roleplays allowed officers to express their emotions as they would in the real-life situations, and the researcher noted that active displays of emotion in the role play were limited to humour and anger. But in the sharing stage of the psychodrama, participants articulated a much wider range of authentic emotional reactions, including frustration, embarrassment, fear, distress, isolation and feeling overwhelmed, undervalued and judged. It is clear that officers were engaging in emotional suppression as a way of coping and in line with their understanding of the feeling/display rules for their roles, as other researchers have noted (Pogrebin and Poole, 1991; Daus and Brown, 2012). The use of psychodrama as a research method, with its stages of roleplay followed by sharing, allows the researcher to see beyond merely the displayed emotion and, in concert with the participants, to explore the hidden authentic emotions.

This two-stage process also enabled the participants to reflect on their experiences and to identify for themselves what their organisational display rules were. For example, in one role play there was a high level of tension between the Night Officer and Kerry, who was trying to support Jo despite the Night Officer's jibes - to the point that the researcher noted how it became somewhat uneasy to observe. Supporting this observation, both groups quickly acknowledged how inappropriate and unhelpful this 'humour' was, and in doing so indicated that there are specific display rules around its use, including how and by whom the humour is delivered:

'... there is a time and a place and you can't really be saying that, especially when someone has been hurt ...'

'If (the) team dickhead says it, you are going to react differently, but if it is like ... one of those cops on teams ... who gives a little bit of banter, but knows when a colleague is in the shit, he is the one that will turn to him and say - you alright mate? And if it comes from that cop you will probably just go - yeah. You won't take it in the same way.'

In the sharing element of the psychodrama, participants playing 'Jo' also noted that the humour was isolating and that they were unable to express their own emotions after having been in a traumatic situation. They were left to suppress their inner thoughts whilst attempting to complete the related paperwork and fend off jibes from their team. One observer noted how 'Jo' felt 'embarrassed' and 'feels isolated' stating their inner thoughts were that they; 'just want to go home and seriously consider a new job'. By utilising this method, we are able to note that rather than humour helping officers to bond in this situation, it is more likely that officers will attempt to suppress their emotions and continue in a dissociative state post traumatic incident, similar to persistent dissociative behaviour, which could increase the likelihood of PTSD outcomes (Briere et al., 2005).

**3.2.1.2. Communication and enforcement of feeling and display rules.** In both the roleplay and the sharing elements of the psychodrama, it became clear that feeling and display rules are communicated and enforced through supervisor behaviour as well as policy and procedure. Participants taking on the role of supervisors in the roleplay demonstrated this perpetuation of the feeling and display rules themselves: implying that police officers' emotions are secondary to the needs of the organisation and public. In the sharing stage, participants expressed their awareness of the disparity between how the public are supported emotionally and the treatment of officer welfare. For example, they pointed out that there is a policy for investigating officers after a police contact death, but not a policy for supporting them. Indeed, the only formal support that does exist for officers who are victims of assault is actually a pledge (not policy) and only a handful of forces have signed up to it or are even aware of it. Even then, its application is dependent on enough resources being available at the time of the incident, a situation indicative of the traumatic circle of silence identified by Rees and Smith (2008).

The sharing stage of psychodrama encourages participants to reflect on the roleplay in light of their previous experiences and they noted how external investigations often restrict the support that can be offered to officers following traumatic events. Officers feel they should continually suppress their emotions, for fear as being seen as incompetent or poor decision makers by the investigation, essentially forcing them into a dissociative state awaiting the outcome of conduct investigations that can last many years. Participants seemed painfully aware of the contrast between how they are expected to treat members of the public and their communities, and how they are treated themselves.

'It is really odd isn't it, the job, it tells us that we have to be compassionate to our victims, yet we don't show compassion to ourselves.'

They also recognised an increase in micromanagement, typical with the change in police culture, which emphasises targets and professionalisation (Westmarland, 2016). This has led to the erosion of trust between supervisors and officers and a perception of an increase in monitoring and surveillance - which further restrict officers' opportunity to authentically display emotion (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). The tension between a need to meet the public's expectations and managerialist targets, as identified by Westmarland (2016), was commented on throughout the workshops. This situation forces both officers and supervisors to walk the line between a compassionate and considerate service, and the need to expedite their work. In turn, this leads to significant emotional modulation throughout an officer's daily work where they feel they have little control or ability to deliver the service that they would wish or is expected of them, resulting in a sense of lack of personal accomplishment typical of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Brown and Woelfenden, 2011). The use of roleplay followed by sharing here helps to bring the participants' attention to display rules that might otherwise be unconsciously perpetuated and establishes the foundation for their exploration of potential solutions.

**3.2.1.3. Silencing vs support.** This exploration of solutions began with participants identifying areas where the pressures of the job turned opportunities to provide support into pressures to remain silent. Silencing pressures were expectations that led to police officers feeling unable to express or deal with their emotions and were discussed in tandem with the need for support to be able to do this. In discussing these areas in the sharing, participants reflected on their experiences in the roleplays and drew parallels with their own past experiences of similar situations. This again demonstrates the value of psychodrama as a method for deeper exploration of emotional labour: the roleplay provides participants with a safe (in terms of organisational judgement as well as psychologically) close-to-real-life experience which then acts as a reminder and gives permission for deeper discussion, which would otherwise be prohibited. We will illustrate this with brief descriptions of

two of the areas participants identified as both exerting pressure but also providing opportunity for support: trust and mandatory support.

Trust was raised as a significant issue when it came to speaking openly about emotion and supporting officers in coping with the pressures and experiences they encountered.

‘At the end of every shift or tour of duty that you know that there is somebody to talk to, that, no matter what happens or how you feel, you have got that trust and that security to know that if you did need to speak to somebody that there is somebody there, ...and that is what needs to be built upon on a day in day out to keep the service going’

Trust was developed through the relationships built on teams but participants noted that this opportunity was increasingly rare, resulting in another silencing pressure:

‘It is probably because they just go out, or come in all single crewed, don’t see their colleagues for ages and then - so how are they going to develop that relationship if they don’t see each other?’

There was a sense of loss of belonging that had been exacerbated by the breakdown of relationships between colleagues and within teams. Single crewing and the use of technology to reduce the amount of time that officers spend in the station (a fall out of the managerialist and target focussed culture (Westmarland, 2016), see officers isolated and unable to connect with their colleagues. This has led to a situation where officers do not feel able to build up a level of trust where they can confide in their colleagues or seek support.

Second, there was a recognition of a need for mandatory support options. Participants were clear that officer welfare was always going to come second to a culture where operational needs took priority, unless it became a mandatory requirement. If officers are not getting time to eat, drink or take a comfort break, then there is little scope for their mental health and well-being to be accommodated.

‘... they aren’t getting time to have a toilet break, they are left on crime scenes excessively longer than they should be, because you have even got governors now not given two hoots, it is all about me, me, me, my team, my team, my budget, so it is very task orientated.’

Without the use of the second element of psychodrama method, namely the group sharing, these reflections and pressures would not be identified or explored by the group.

### 3.2.2. Officer well-being: Co-creation of solutions

In the context of the significant challenges identified by participants around emotional labour in policing, the next theme draws together their suggestions for potential solutions. Participants’ role plays and sharing made it clear that they experienced a work context which prioritised operational needs over officer well-being and they were able to make recommendations for ways to bring greater prioritisation to officers’ well-being. These focused on the need for better (or any) debriefs, prioritising well-being in policy and culture, and building a sense of belonging. The roleplays served to highlight the practical limitations placed on officers as well as the restrictions from policy and culture that they had learned to live with, while the sharing stage enabled participants to reflect further on these issues. The value of using psychodrama was highlighted by the participants themselves expressing their surprise at how it highlighted problems they had not even considered before, but also how it helped them engaged in open and meaningful discussion.

**3.2.2.1. Debriefs.** Officers lamented the demise of the debrief and personal one to one meetings with supervisors. Debriefing is now seen as a thing of the past that used to be carried out with teams on a regular basis, either in the canteen or in the bar, both providing relaxed environments and reminiscent of the scenes described in Pogrebin and Poole (1991) study. Participants were quick to point out that there is now no physical space within which to carry out a team debrief other than in front of other teams in the open-plan report writing room.

‘That scenario was good in showing how desensitised we are to the space that we are doing the debrief in, what I noticed that it was done in

an open plan, so you are not giving that person the opportunity, if they want to be their true self and show their true emotions, or break down, or they actually want to talk about private things or anything, you know, you are not giving yourselves that time and space - that kind of resonated with me that.’

A further element of display rules acted out in the roleplays can be identified here in the sharing stage, in the implication that it is not acceptable for emotions to be displayed publicly. Nevertheless, the lack of physical provision for officer welfare needs was identified as a demonstrable organisational signal to officers that their emotions and well-being were not valued or worth investing in. It was clear that the debrief is something that participants would welcome back into their working lives as a way to express their emotions. And it does not escape them that this is a practice that already exists within their role, though not for the benefit of officers:

‘With the debrief process it would be nice to have something that is formalised, we do it for victims through liaison officers, at least you get that, we don’t do it enough with officers especially in a situation like this.’

**3.2.2.2. Integration of policy and culture change.** When considering recommendations for operational and cultural changes to improve officers’ psychological health in relational to emotional expression, participants stated the need for policies that put officers’ welfare and emotional needs in line with operational needs. In the role play the attending officer (‘Jo’) is described as being on scene guard in clothes with the victim’s blood on and the participants acknowledged that this was a regular experience in present day operational policing. It appeared clear to participants that the operational needs come before the safety and the welfare of the officers, requiring officers to suppress their emotional responses to this kind of situation. It was acknowledged that it was more than likely there was no one to relieve the officer due to shortages of resources and a recognition that any time that was allocated to officer well-being would have to be mandatory in order to be prioritised. It was also recognised that this needed an integration of policy and culture change otherwise well-being would again come secondary to operational needs.

‘For me it is changing the culture, ...We can have all of the policies in the world, but unless you have got the culture to go with it, it is pointless. But you need the policy to make it happen, ...it could be added in ... and then it is that personal debrief and that return to normality from the excited state, ...you always talk about fight and flight in your force, ... but we never talk about rest and digest and for me, unless that is in policy it will never happen.’

Culture change was seen as something that needed to be addressed at the point of recruitment - where the dialogue around what officers would experience emotionally needed to begin. This would be coupled with educating officers around self-awareness and coping whilst still in training, the intention being that by the time that they were fully operational the conversation around emotions had already begun and would be a normal part of police culture.

‘So what needs to change is the recruitment phase, so prior to actually joining the job, [get] some guest speakers in, officer who have suffered with depression, and PTSD or anxiety to give a talk, or they could do role plays, this is what you are going to be confronted with on a daily basis, do you think that you can handle this - compounded with the fact that you are working night shifts, you will be in the report writing room the majority of the time, you will be going to custody dealing with prisoners, building all of that in and telling them the harsh reality of policing before they actually join.’

Participants also talked about the need to provide continual training in people management skills for supervisors. They noted that this went hand in hand with investigative skills in terms of importance:

‘... as a person skill when you are talking to someone, you are actually investigating because you are trying to abstract some



information from that person of what I need, what they need, whatever situation you are in, so it is still investigation but it is just done in a people way rather than - my points to prove, my point for the offence.'

**3.2.2.3. Sense of belonging.** Discussion about how to change culture led onto discussion about the concept of the police family and the need for a sense of belonging and support from within the organisation. Participants expressed how they had joined to belong to the police family and that they felt the need for support from people who shared their experiences of police life. This extended into a need to feel valued and to be publicly and privately supported by their senior leaders - but also by the wider public, who they presently feel isolated from. There were pockets of positive experience where teams were trying to build that police family support network outside of work hours:

'We have started arranging walking days with dogs on our rest days with our team and we have started to go out for drinks and meals together, to get that bond back, because, like you say single crewing, you can't off load, there is no one to talk to, police stations are sterile, you can't speak in a room anywhere.'

These findings demonstrate that psychodrama is an effective method for enabling participants to reflect on their emotional experiences in a group setting and to co-create practical recommendations. Roleplays allow participants to act out their normal responses to real life situations, serving to prime their discussions but also enabling them to take on the role of observation of their actions, which they do not normally have the opportunity to do. This is then further developed in the sharing stage, where participants and the researcher work together to develop their understanding of the challenges and pressures as well as co-creating solutions. The success of the psychodrama method in eliciting and capturing data on several different levels, from action, self-reflection, group discussion and observer reports supports the use of the psychodrama principles as a way to enable participants to explore their experiences of emotional labour, without being silenced by the very display rules we were seeking to explore.

### 3.2.3. Results of taking part in the research

Finally, participants stated, unprompted, that they felt the therapeutic benefit of being able to express their authentic emotions in a safe environment and suggesting that this very method could be used by the police service as a means of supporting officers' emotional coping. This reflects the extant research which finds that constructing a narrative, sense making, and expressing emotions related to a traumatic event whilst in a safe environment provides therapeutic relief (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). Indeed, when developing recommendations for how the police force could help or support officers' well-being, they were enthusiastic in their suggestion that role play become a part of the toolkit.

## 4. Conclusion

By reporting on a study of emotional labour in the police, we have demonstrated that the principles of psychodrama provide a robust, exploratory, and respectful qualitative method for exploring sensitive topics in psychology. By creating a psychological safe space through the warm up and role play, the workshops demonstrated how participants, who would normally become reticent in speaking openly about emotional experience, quickly identified the potential for therapeutic engagement within the process. Participants felt able to truly explore and express their own emotions and recount personal experiences without the fear of recrimination or judgement. In true emancipatory form, Psychodrama encourages participants themselves to identify solutions to the issues they experience, empowering them to speak on what was otherwise a taboo subject, and contributing directly to our understanding of their experience of emotional labour. Indeed, the level of engagement by all participants supported the notion that they valued a

safe space to express their emotional experiences. When exploring ideas around problem solutions, participants suggested that events similar to the psychodrama workshop would be ideal for seeking support from peer groups in a safe environment. The data collection workshops, in typical psychodrama form, played an emancipatory role in supporting participants' therapeutic emotional expression.

In conclusion, we believe using psychodrama as a methodology to underpin research into sensitive and emotionally charged subjects provides an innovative and novel qualitative methodology that allows the enactment of a true critical action methodology. This methodology has a wealth of unique benefits for participants and researchers alike, and provides strong contributions to both theory and practice in terms of new insights into the organisational context (in this case policing) and in the application of the methodology per se to real world applied research problems. We have demonstrated how our use of psychodrama enabled participants to engage in and discuss a topic that is not only sensitive but also taboo in the organisational setting thus allowing the emancipatory ambition of critical action research to be captured in real time. The physical and psychological action of acting out pre-determined scenarios supports the self-reflective requirements of critical action research, and we have demonstrated how this has delivered truly rich data that are not reported as achievable through the more traditional methods of observation or round table discussion. In providing scenarios and engaging with characters within those scenarios participants are able to recognise imbalances of power within the setting, and objectively identify the problems that need to be addressed, truly seating participants in the role of co-researcher, whilst at the same time allowing them to reflect on how they are personally subjected to the issues at hand. This powerful notion enables engagement in the action and staging of psychodrama where problem identification and resolution is situated within the operational environment, ensuring that any arising recommendations are more likely to succeed in a 'real-life' setting. Taken together, we position the contribution of Psychodrama as an emerging and greatly valuable method that is truly supportive of the ambitions of qualitative research methods and of critical action research in seeking to illuminate the nuances and depths of the human condition - in context.

## Credit author statement

**SJ Lennie:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Anna Sutton:** Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. **Sarah Crozier:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

## Funding

This work was supported by a PhD studentship grant to the first author by Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. The funders had no involvement in the study or decision to submit this article.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2021.100066>.

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